

Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin H. Latrobe, April 14, 1811, from Thomas Jefferson and the National Capital. Edited by Saul K. Padover.

Jefferson to Latrobe

Monticello, April 14, 1811.

Dear Sir, — I feel much concern that suggestions stated in your letter of the 5th instant, should at this distance of time be the subject of uneasiness to you, and I regret it the more as they make appeals to memory, a faculty never strong in me, and now too sensibly impaired to be relied on. It retains no trace of the particular conversations alluded to, nor enables me to say that they are or are not correct. The only safe appeal for me is to the general impressions received at the time, and still retained with sufficient distinctness. These were that you discharged the duties of your appointment with ability, diligence and zeal, but that in the article of expense you were not sufficiently guarded. You must remember my frequent cautions to you on this head, the measures I took, by calling for frequent accounts of expenditures and contracts, to mark to you, as well as to myself, when they were getting beyond the limits of the appropriations, and the afflicting embarrassments on a particular occasion where these limits had been unguardedly and greatly transcended. These sentiments I communicated to you freely at the time, as it was my duty to do. Another principle of with me was to admit no innovations on the established plans, but on the strongest grounds. When, therefore, I thought first of placing the floor of the Representative chamber on the level of the basement of the building, and of throwing into its height the cavity of the dome, in the manner of the Halle aux Bleds at Paris, I deemed it due to Dr. Thornton, author of the plan of the Capitol, to consult him on the change. He not only consented, but appeared heartily to approve of the alteration. For the same reason, as well as on motives of economy, I was anxious, in converting the

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Senate chamber into a Judiciary room, to preserve its original form, and to leave the same arches and columns standing. On your representation, however, that the columns were decayed and incompetent to support the incumbent weight, I acquiesced in the change you proposed, only striking out the addition which would have made part of the middle building, and would involve a radical change in

that which had not been sanctioned. I have no reason to doubt but that in the execution of the Senate and Court rooms, you have adhered to the plan communicated to me and approved; but never having seen them since their completion, I am not able to say so expressly. On the whole, I do not believe any one has ever done more justice to your professional abilities than myself. Besides constant commendations of your taste in architecture, and science in execution, I declared on many and all occasions that I considered you as the only person in the United States who could have executed the Representative chamber, or who could execute the middle buildings on any of the plans proposed. There have been too many witnesses of these declarations to leave any doubt as to my opinion on this subject. Of the value I set on your society, our intercourse before as well as during my office, can have left no doubt with you; and I should be happy in giving further proofs to you personally at Monticello, of which you have sometimes flattered me with the hope of an opportunity.

I have thus, Sir, stated general truths without going into the detail of particular facts or expressions, to which my memory does not enable me to say yea or nay. But a consciousness of my consistency in private as well as public, supports me in affirming that nothing ever passed from me contradictory to these general truths, and that I have been misapprehended if it has ever been so supposed. I return you the plans received with your letter, and pray you to accept assurances of my continued esteem and respect.

[Pp. 578–80, WRITINGS OF JEFFERSON, Washington, V.]